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## Drinking to history, not politics

**The owner of the Irish pub Four Green Fields says he's in business to make money, not play politics. But yes, he does support the IRA.**

By KATHRYN WEXLER

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The owner of the Irish pub Four Green Fields says he's in business to make money, not play politics. But yes, he does support the IRA.

TAMPA -- Let's get this straight: Four Green Fields does not promote the Irish Republican Army.

That's right, insists Colin Breen, the 53-year-old owner of the downtown pub with its exclusively Irish Catholic bartenders.

Nothing here but old posters and news clippings heralding the brave hearts who fought for Ireland's freedom. So what if there's a framed announcement by Sinn Fein, the Irish Republican Army's political arm that was branded a terrorist group by the U.S. government until six years ago?

That picture by the kitchen? Just an autographed photo of Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams with a personal thanks scrawled to Breen.

"Am I pro-IRA? Absolutely," says Breen, an iced tea in his hand one recent afternoon.

"Is the bar? The bar is here to make money."

And anyway, it's not the sort of thing Breen wants to focus on.

"I always wanted to open a bar in New York City . . ."

But Colin, the, um, decorations?

"Irish history," says Breen, a former securities trader. "It's just that Irish history has been British oppression."

If the items plastering the walls are propaganda, it's not working. Most patrons down their pints, blissfully unaware.

When Four Green Fields opened in 1992 on Platt Street, it quickly became a magnet for federal agents at 5 o'clock, downtown lawyers at 7 o'clock, and by 9 o'clock crowds of flirty young singles who make

Breen's eyes roll.

Every Friday night, every Gasparilla Day, and most certainly every St. Patrick's Day, the place is packed. This year, Breen is expecting to top the 6,000 customers he says he drew last St. Patty's Day. Hard rock radio station 102.5-FM is teaming up with the Guinness distributor to promote the affair.

Breen, sitting at a table with representatives from both, was blasé.

"Any beer specials?" asked Laurie Lattimore from the station.

"There'll be no beer specials," said Breen. He's not having any gimmicks like green beer, either. "Come if you like, stay away if you don't" is the prevailing ethos here.

Across from him is a framed Irish poem about a British soldier: "Go home soldier, before we send you you home, dead."

Breen, with a soft dimples and a commanding 6-foot-2 frame, didn't hear the calling of his Irish heritage until late in life. Raised in St. Petersburg, he joined Merrill Lynch and moved near Hartford, Conn., a hotbed of IRA support. There, he started thinking of the lineage his family had never much discussed. And he realized, he said, that he may be related to a famous IRA operative who died for the cause.

But he'd rather not go into details. Let's just say it secured his bond to Ireland, where he'll be vacationing soon with his 9-year-old daughter. Northern Ireland, ground zero for IRA activism and British crackdowns, is not on their itinerary.

They're headed for Dublin. But why not the heart of the troubles?

"I know I'm on a list," Breen explained, "and it's not worth being detained for the hours they want to mess with you."

Closer to home, Breen, who is divorced and also has a 22-year-old son, is planning to open an art gallery next to the bar to sell his Irish art collection.

"Just another way to spread the Irish," said Breen, who sometimes sounds like he has a brogue, something he thinks he must have picked up from the staff.

When Breen tried to spread more Irish to Hartford in 1997 with the debut of two more bars, it seemed a no-brainer. Instead, it proved two Irish pubs too many. A year later, they became Japanese and Chinese restaurants.

So it is in Tampa, where Breen's patrons mostly remain oblivious to the "history" around them, that his work thrives.

"The majority of customers probably wouldn't even know what this stuff is," said Breen, sounding down. True enough, one visitor shrugged when asked a few nights ago if she'd ever looked around.

"We usually just hang out in the corner and drink beer," said Natalie Portman, 22.

Breen met Bobby O'Neill at Four Green Fields years ago and he became a minority partner in 1997. A first-generation Irish Catholic who grew up in the Bronx, O'Neill is chief of the organized crime section

at the U.S. Attorney's Office in Tampa. He says he doesn't even have an opinion about the IRA, and he argues that patriotism is the focus here.

"I think (customers) can clearly see it's a pro-Irish bar," said O'Neill. "I don't feel the pub is pro-IRA."

It was Breen who got Gerry Adams, the public face of the IRA, to come to Tampa for fundraisers -- twice. The last time, Adams signed autographs at Four Green Fields afterward.

Has the bar's politics . . . er, "history," ever given anyone heartburn?

No, Breen said. Well, come to think of it, there was that time a few years ago when some English sailors stumbled in, he said, intentionally upsetting customers' drinks.

"We kicked out the British navy," Breen recalled. "The next day, I took a letter to the harbor master saying they couldn't come back."

Even inspiration for the bar's name came from a song written about more than leprechauns.

"I have four green fields, one of them's in bondage," goes one of Tommy Makem's lines, referring to Northern Ireland, part of the United Kingdom.

Breen said he keeps his most inflammatory artwork hidden. As he put it, "There's nothing here that says they're hateful bastards and we're going to drive them out no matter what."

Let's talk about how to pour a Guinness.

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